

Superhero Faith for Ordinary Christians:

#4 Tangled Vines

John 15:1-8; Acts 8:26-40

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United in Christ by his love and presence, the church flourishes when its vines produce surprising, abundant fruit.

Reading the Acts of the Apostles can leave you breathless. It can feel like you're catching up on the latest episode of your favorite superhero caper. If Acts had an announcer, the voice would boom an introduction to each chapter. "When we last saw our heroes," the announcer proclaims, Peter and John had been dragged before the council, forced to testify as to how the disabled man was able to walk once again. Meanwhile, all of the believers were "of one heart and soul," and none claimed private ownership of any possessions, except for one couple who got caught and later died because they had withheld a portion of their tithe. Meanwhile, the high priests were persecuting the apostles, which led to the stoning death of Stephen, whose execution was overseen by an especially zealous Pharisee named Saul." The announcer gulps in a breath of air, and then continues, "But have no fear, for our heroes are quickly scattered around Judea and even into Samaria and beyond. And that's where we find Philip today, hustling down a desert road on the way to Gaza."

Scripture note: when the Bible says, "a wilderness road" think of those signs outside of gas stations in Death Valley, California that say, "Last chance for gas for 150 miles."

Everything in this book seems to be moving at hyper speed, with the Spirit picking up and teleporting the Apostles just where God needs them. But the real power behind these stories is not that they are accounts of superheroes or even superhumans. The real power behind these stories is not revealed in the miracles and supernatural feats the early church accomplished.

The early church's story is a story of ordinary women and men who encountered the astonishing love of God. It is the story of those who, in the words of 1 John have discovered that "love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. As we remain in Christ, we grow—not as individuals, but as a living, breathing church filled with ordinary people.

Howard Thurman, the great theologian and spiritual writer, was a mentor to people as amazing as the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King and our own Dottie McClelland. In his book “Footprints of a Dream, Thurman says that the “movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of (humans) often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires.”

He tells the story of leaving his hometown in Daytona Beach, FL to attend a boarding school in Jacksonville. There were no high schools for black children in Daytona Beach at that time. Thurman arrived at the train station, and bought his ticket. But he was shocked to discover that while he had enough money for his ticket, he lacked enough to check his trunk that contained everything he owned. Thurman sat on his trunk and cried, believing that his hopes of attending school had been dashed. But then a man came up to him and asked why he was crying. When Thurman told his story, the man said, “Follow me, son,” and led him back to the ticket window. It was the loving action of an anonymous stranger who changed the trajectory of Thurman’s life—and which changed the world.

That is what it means to bear fruit, to abide in the powerful and dynamic community of Christ. The church is not filled with superheroes, but with anonymous strangers who have come together, who believe that perfect love casts out all fear, and who know what it means to abide in Christ.

That fruit cannot be counted or boxed up and sold at market. It is fruit that grows out of a relationship with the living, Risen Christ. It is fruit that produces a love for others—a love that empowers Christians as we remain in community. Christ invites us to grow. The trick is to not let our vines get tangled.

For the Apostle Philip, remaining connected to Christ opened him to being called to take a walk down a lonely wilderness road. It’s just another day in the life of the apostles: plucked from the seat of controversy and sent out to a lonely road on the way to Gaza. Of course, “Gaza” means something different to us today. The roads to Gaza today are lined with suffering and pain, unrelenting violence. Those on the roads to Gaza today are caught by the winds of war and terrorism, all of it painful reminders of the ways we still are divided into categories of “us” versus “them.”

For Philip, “us” meant those who were Jewish by heritage but who had encountered the promises of Christ. Likewise, “them” meant those who were not like us. They were

Gentiles, including Greeks and Romans who were beginning to respond to the Gospel. But in the astonishing ways of God, Philip was about to learn who else were “them.”

Philip spots a chariot belonging to an official of the Queen of the Ethiopians. We’re told a number of things about this man: he is, first, a foreigner, someone who is not from Palestine. But not only that, he is Ethiopian, an African, certainly not a Greek or a Roman. We’re told he is a court official, entrusted with the queen’s treasury, and that he was on his way back from Jerusalem where he had come to worship.

But there’s something else: he is a eunuch, a man who has been castrated. A slave, certainly, but also someone who was neither exactly male or exactly female. Eunuchs were prohibited from entering the temple or participating in any form of Jewish worship. The larger Graeco-Roman society, which prized male virility, saw them as less than human.

So, there you have it: he is a foreigner, an African, a person who was rich in some ways but marginalized and powerless in others. He was an anomaly, a person who had been disfigured and held in disgust because of his gender. He certainly was not the type of person the Evangelism committee of the early church was looking to recruit.

Isn’t astonishing how God works?

The Ethiopian was someone who had been excluded. He didn’t fit into the categories that ranked who was proper. People kept their children away from him. He was shunned—but despite all of this, he had gone to Jerusalem to worship. Even now he’s sitting in his chariot reading from the Prophet Isaiah. He’s not just thumbing through the James Patterson novel he picked up at the airport. He is, to everyone’s surprise, engaging with scripture.

His eagerness to be baptized leads him to find water, right there in the desert of all places!

His story makes me wonder, “To whom are we called to embrace? To whom are we called to go? Who are the excluded, the “them” who stand outside of community, whose stories we have not embraced, whose dreams we have not heard, whose tears we have not carried?

I heard a story about a church that was struggling to get “back to the good old days.” Its neighborhood had changed, and no longer reflected the largely white membership of the church. They tried different ways to reach out to the community, but the responses were met with suspicion and soon the church members were tired of being told it was

their job to keep reaching out. One couple started to walk around the neighborhood, talking to neighbors and store owners. “How might our church be helpful?” they asked. At first they were rejected—one shop owner told them in no uncertain terms to get out of his store. Through prayer and reflection, the couple tried something different. They got up every morning and went around their neighborhood picking up trash. People began to notice, and stopped to engage them in conversation. It took more than a year, but eventually that shop keeper invited them back into his store for coffee. The couple learned what was really needed in the community, and how the church might help. They listened more than they preached. They kept loving.

Each day we see the divisions of “us” and “them” sink deeper into our culture. It has kept us from being surprised the way Philip was surprised. It has kept us from responding to the nudge of the Holy Spirit. Instead, we allow fear to hold us captive. Anthony DeMello, a Jesuit priest, spiritual writer and psychologist wrote that what we fear most is not the unknown, but rather the loss of the known. The choice is between being open to new experiences and insights, or retreating back into the closed spaces of the familiar.

Perfect love, 1 John tells us, is the love we experience in Jesus Christ. It is the love that keeps us connected to one another in community. And it is the love that casts aside all fear. Amen.